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Views on Black Literature: An Interview with Clarence Major

E. Ethelbert Miller

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Poet-Novelist Clarence Major, who was writer-in-residence with the English Department during the 1975-76 academic year, was interviewed recently by E. Ethelbert Miller, director of the Afro-American Resource Center at Howard University and co-editor of *Synergy: An Anthology of Washington, D.C. Black Poetry*. Author of several literary works, Major's latest book is *Reflex And Bone Structure*. His other books include, *All Night Visitors* (1969), *The Dictionary of Afro-American Slang* (1970), *Private Line* (1971), *The Cotton Club* (1972), and *Slaveship and Relationship* (1973). In the following interview, Major discusses his writing, other Black experimental writers in America, and the problems of Black literature. Ed.

MILLER: In opening up this interview I'd like to first ask you what new things are you presently working on?

MAJOR: I'm working on a novel, Ethelbert, that's giving me hell. It's the biggest challenge that I've ever taken on—in terms of a writing project. It's called *Inlet*. It's a novel that, theoretically, should have no central characters, and I also didn't want to have an idea as a center of focus, either. In other words, what I am trying to do is take the novel, the idea of the novel, the concept of the novel and turn it in on itself. This is to dissolve some of the stale assumptions about the novel.

MILLER: Let's go back and look at some of your previous novels. How does this differ from what you did in *All Night Visitors* or even in *Reflex and Bone Structure*?

MAJOR: Well, *All Night Visitors* was kind of a hodge podge put together sort of thing. It was scrapped out of three novels that had in effect been failures. Novels that I somehow had not managed to write very well. So I took the best parts of three novels and brought them together and it just happened that at the time everything I was writing was thematically related. So that the combination of those things . . .

MILLER: So you didn't start off with a concrete objective so to speak?

MAJOR: Not really. I was really trying to teach myself something about how to put a novel together. I really didn't know much about how to write a novel. It took five years to get *All Night Visitors* in the form that it finally came out in. But the thing I wanted to say about that is: basically it's a conventional novel with some surrealist overtones or undertones, changes and so on. In other words, I was operating from the assumption that a novel had to be a certain thing and I was trying to discover how to make the novel do what I'd been told a novel should do.

MILLER: Have you given up on definitions or have you developed your own?

MAJOR: Well what I tried to do (I don't think I have developed any definitions), I tried to discover the possibilities . . . I tried to discover a larger terrain . . . I tried to discover what a novel can be. This is also true with a poem. I try to discover not what a poem should be but what it can be.

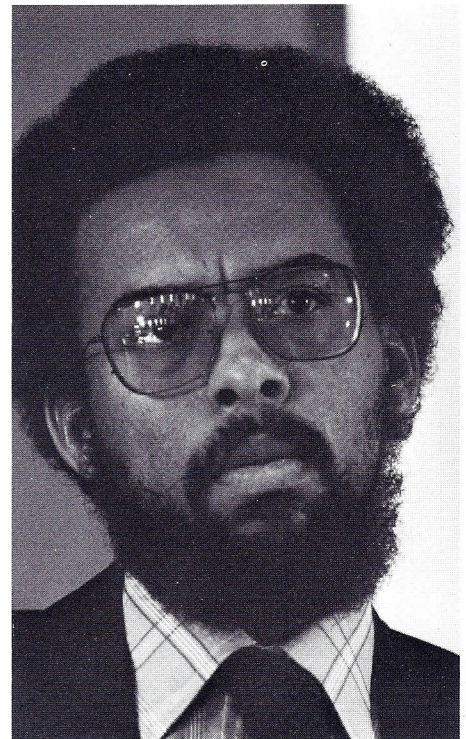
MILLER: What are the limitations that you encountered in terms of the novels and in poetry?

MAJOR: We talk about limitations . . . we have to talk about . . . I don't know if I want to use the word limitations but I know what you mean. I think immediately: the first thing that comes to mind is language. The limitations imposed on the writer by the very nature of language. And then if you start talking about the limitations of language then what are you going to do?

MILLER: That's a question I wanted to ask you in terms of some of the problems that novelists and poets encounter in dealing with language. You don't seem in your novels to alter the wording in terms of maybe writing dialect or something like that. You know what I mean? Like grammatical changes that you have? You know what I'm saying? I was thinking of like Kelley's *Dunfords Travels Everywhere*, where he has changes . . . you're reading something different.

MAJOR: Where he's capturing the flavor and tone of colloquial speech . . .

Clarence Major



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROY LEWIS

MILLER: I don't find that in your . . . (novels) . . .

MAJOR: But what I try to do . . . I try to create the flavor and tone of everyday speech—the way Black people might talk. Most of my characters are Black characters. But I try to do it not through dialect but through syntax and through rhythm of language. Like I have characters in *No*, which is a Southern novel. *No* is set in the South. And the characters—Southern people—they don't talk in dialect. They talk in Southern rhythms.

MILLER: Do you feel that your novels should be read aloud?

MAJOR: I think it would help. Just like reading a poem. I mean that it's an extension of a printed page. I try to think of a novel as a kind of a lyrical entity. I'm not always successful in creating that. I have more success with short stories, for example. For instance, there is a short story I have. I didn't expect it to look as good as it did once it was published. When I first saw it in manuscript I thought it was lousy.

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AN INTERVIEW
WITH
CLARENCE MAJOR

Then I read it and said I'll publish this. It's called "All American Cheese." It's about the mythical Black girl and the mythical white girl in college who are friends, and so. And I just realized that the short story by its very form is closer to the poem than the novel can ever be.

MILLER: Which genre do you feel more comfortable in? I know you have a reputation as a novelist; you also have a reputation as a poet. Do you ever write poems that tend to become chapters for your novels?

MAJOR: It works both ways. I've used poems and worked them into novels and I've used things that I have scrapped from a novel and used as poems. But the crucial question for me, I think, the real answer to your question is: I'm not comfortable with any form. I'm always fighting the form. I'm always at war with the form because I want to try to turn it inside out and see what's there.

MILLER: Placing yourself among other Black writers, who else do you think is battling forms and definitions?

MAJOR: I'm working now on a . . . along-side working on this novel . . . I'm working on an essay that will also be a talk. And in it I'm trying to examine what I call the tradition of experimental Black fiction . . . experimental and innovative Black fiction. And I see people like Fran Ross, Charles Wright, Ishmael Reed, William Demby, George Schuyler, Jean Toomer, Alice Walker—Alice Walker in her book, *In Love and Trouble*, has a lot of innovations there; and what I mean by innovations? I mean anything that is a departure from the worn out norm. Whether its in subject matter or whether its in technique or form. I would place among my list of writers of departure (I like to call them) people like Zora Neale Hurston who wrote, *Of Mules and Men*, which I think is a revolutionary book and, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which is probably—if not the first feminist novel by a woman—the first feminist novel by a Black woman. In other words, she was concerned with the

liberation was secondary. And that's what I meant—in that sense it is a departure from a tradition.

MILLER: What about some of these writers one labels experimental; how much of what they are doing originates in Black culture and how much of it is borrowed?

MAJOR: I think what happens is, even with the literature of departure there is, if you really look at it, if you look at the terms of the departure: like Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* for example. It is a novel that is ultimately concerned with the destiny and the plight of Black people, but it's a departure in terms of treatment and so on from what Black writers have been doing generally with that very same subject. So I don't think there is a cut off point. I don't think the departure necessarily implies that there is a break with the concerns of one's culture and heritage—I think it's an extension. I think what it comes down to is pushing it further to its limits so that whatever was not obvious or available on the surface becomes more accessible.

MILLER: Let's move into some of the themes that you've dealt with. I noticed that throughout your novels and even some of your poems there is a considerable degree of sex and violence. Is there any relationship? Are you equating the sexual act with being a violent act?

MAJOR: Not necessarily. *All Night Visitors*, which is the first thing that would come to mind, sex is used as a kind of alternative to brutality. The young narrator and the central character is a Black man who's returning from a violent war [Vietnam] and he has nothing—no job—nothing—absolutely nothing that he can hold onto but himself—his body. And it's the last natural thing in the world that he has and his body is, you know—he essentially is a peaceful person and the expression of that peace I guess in its natural outlet for him would be through sex. Actually, I think Eli Bolton comes along in a real tradition.

MILLER: Do you see any relationship between your work and what maybe Van

Peebles was trying to do in [his film] "Sweetback"? 5

MAJOR: Yeah. I think so, possibly.

MILLER: Another question . . . I know you have a number of poems that deal with Vietnam—what are some of your personal views concerning what the war meant to you as a writer?

MAJOR: You know I was never there. Vietnam was a television show—if you saw it at 6:00 every evening. But it was really more than that. I am just saying to our national sensibility—unfortunately that's what it was—a television show. But on another level, if we want to get into the political implications and so on, had I been there—I try to imagine the horror. The rape scenes in *All Night Visitors* was an attempt on my part—not so much to imagine what Vietnam was like—but what man's brutality has been to man all along throughout history in every country. You can see it anywhere you have a war . . . the women and children . . . the women are raped unmercifully. You know it's the same thing all over—everywhere you see it. It says something very horrible about us. But Vietnam, of course, I think is a special horror—an absolute special horror but I don't know if you wanted me to talk about that.

MILLER: I just wanted to ask you that question in relationship to your work. Let's move into your most recent novel, *Reflex and Bone Structure*. I notice . . . I came across about two or three reviews. I call them mentions. To me no one has dealt with the book in terms of what the book is about. Most reviewers have written about the Fiction Collective, but in your words what is *Reflex and Bone Structure* about?

MAJOR: I was trying to . . . well first of all . . . Let me go back and see if I understand . . . see if I can explain what I really had in mind. The first draft was meant to . . . was really written for myself. I really wasn't sure if I wanted to publish it. I was doing something almost in a state of despair because I wasn't happy with my work, the writing I had done up till that point. 2

6 And I was sort of pacing myself in a way when I sat down and started working on that first draft and the thing that I felt was that I could put anything on paper for the first time—because no one's gonna read it—to hell with everybody, you know, this is mine. And it was a very liberating feeling, you know. I said this is mine and I can just write anything that comes to my mind. But then I began to notice after a few weeks or so that there was a form—there was a kind of tendency toward control that I really was concerned with . . . things I thought I wasn't concerned with. But there was a looseness that I had never seen in my work before—a kind of looseness and it had something to do with my attitude toward what I was doing and I wasn't all uptight about, well, you know, this and that . . . People aren't going to be able to understand this.

MILLER: You weren't concerned about that. You weren't writing for a particular audience.

MAJOR: Right. I wasn't. Suddenly I was just doing this for myself. Then when I finished it I thought it was very simple.

MILLER: How long did it take you to write *Reflex*?

MAJOR: Well, the first draft I put together in six months; and I just didn't work very hard.

MILLER: Was that short or long in comparison to how long it took you to write your other novels?

MAJOR: They were all different, you know. *All Night Visitors* took five years, off and on. I never have had a systematic working habit. If I have to do an essay I can sit down and write an essay in two or three days—maybe in one day, if I am lucky, but I'm not the kind of person who can get up in the morning and go to the typewriter everyday. I don't do it. I can't do it. And it depends on where I am living, for example. Parts of *All Night Visitors* were written in Mexico and I could work for 16, 17, 20 hours there because of the whole atmosphere. It lent itself to that kind of thing. I lived in a village where there were no telephones, for example,

but you can't do that here. Imagine sitting at a typewriter for 17 hours. So, *No* was written over a period of—well I dashed off the first draft of *No* in three months and then put it away and didn't touch it for a whole summer. Then I went back and I think I worked on it a year—just slowly. I just can't sit down and write a novel: a novel has to grow almost without understanding what it's going to be.

MILLER: Recently quite a number of new novels have come out. Charles Johnson has a novel and quite a number of other people. Do you feel the novel is suffering or do you see it having a rebirth?

MAJOR: I think its both suffering and having a rebirth. I think, in order for the novel to be reborn, it has to die constantly. It's interesting—the connection you mention—Charles Johnson. Seems a lot of Black men are writing novels about Black women.

MILLER: What about someone like Gayl Jones? How she portrays . . .

MAJOR: It's interesting. Gayl has, I think, a very . . . you mean looking at her the other way? Her image of men isn't very bright at all. I just finished her second novel and it's very bleak. I did a review of it for *Library Journal*. I gave it an excellent review but it's not a happy book—it's a very unhappy book—it's a mysterious and tortured book. I won't go into it right now.

MILLER: Okay. I really want to ask you some questions about your poetry. You did a book, *Cotton Club*, which I thought was interesting. It seemed to focus on a particular point in time. Do you think that this is something that poets need to do, perhaps go back and recapture and tell historical events?

MAJOR: I think we have to find our subject matter wherever our emotional energy takes us. If that is what really moves you. I think you have to really be moved deeply. Whether it's a historical episode in the lives of Black people or whatever. It has to be something you feel at a gut-level in order to give it the kind of energy and life that will sustain it. So that you can

make other people care about what you're doing.

MILLER: You sound as if you think Black poets have not been doing that?

MAJOR: I know I can think of a few Black poets who have handled the historical thing very well. There's Gerald Barrax who has done some remarkable things.

MILLER: I guess [Robert] Hayden you would include?

MAJOR: Definitely.

MILLER: [Melvin] Tolson?

MAJOR: Yeah, right. But of the contemporary poets in my own age group I would say I can't think of one better than Barrax who is the guy who wrote . . . I forget the title of his book [*Another Kind of Rain*, Published in 1970 by the Pittsburgh University Press.] but anyway it was published by the University of Pittsburgh Press. He has, I think, a masterpiece of a poem that deals with the slave trade. It's about 30 pages long. It's a saga. It's an overwhelming poem. I published it in a magazine called *Works*. I was guest editor of *Works*. I can't think of another poem that deals that successfully with the slave trade with all its Christian implications and European sensibility and the Africans, and so on.

MILLER: You've published quite a number of people. Looking at your anthology, *The New Black Poetry*, how did you approach it? What types of writers were you trying to bring together?

MAJOR: Well I wasn't thinking so much about the writers; I was thinking in terms of the poems—good poems that I felt were good; and that was my only guideline really. So it was a very subjective kind of process. I looked through a lot of bad poems to find the good ones.

MILLER: You still have quite a number of people in that anthology who went on—since that book was printed—to become major writers.

MAJOR: That's true. I'm very happy about that. But I didn't have any guidelines except my own taste. And I'll tell you another thing: I was looking more at technique and structure than I was at subject matter.³

MILLER: That's the thing that you emphasized in your introduction and also in your collection of essays, *Dark and Feeling*. This might be my own bias but I classify you among people who are emphasizing not ideology but rather craft. Do you see any dialogue or lack of dialogue between the different types of writers?

MAJOR: Yeah. I think there's a lack of dialogue and I think it's unfortunate, because, whatever area of literature you're concerned with—whether it's the area of experiments in technique or exploration of the political implications or subject matter—I think there's room for dialogue and I think that various groups of writers concerned with various things have a lot to offer to each other. And they should communicate and talk. The problem I think isn't so much that there's no means for communication, I think the whole thing is complicated by a kind of commercialism aside from the little personality problems that are always there. But there's a kind of commercialism and a kind of competition that's always in the way and it's encouraged rather than put aside. It's encouraged by the critical climate and by the whole nature of publishing.

MILLER: Do you think that one of the reasons could be that writers are also adopting the roles of critics?

MAJOR: Yeah. Right. When I was living in New York, a lot of us used to get together—Ishmael Reed, John Williams, Ronald Fair, Joe Johnson, Ron Welburn—about 10 or 15 of us and we would talk about these problems. No one was doing any serious criticism of literature. No one was really doing anything and I think the consensus there—and I'm sure it was going on all over the country wherever Black writers gathered—the consensus was that we had to do it ourselves. I personally don't feel that I can write brilliant criticism. I know what I feel about books but I don't think that—I don't have an analytical mind. I don't have that kind of mentality.

MILLER: But you seem to be emphasizing craft and how things are put together, which I think would be very important at a

time when people are dealing primarily with themes and ideology.

MAJOR: That may be, but I think what we sometimes forget is that the message—people are so concerned with the message and I'm not minimizing it because I realize the message is always there whether it's implicit or explicit. It's there and every form of art has a message, right. But it seems to me that it's ridiculous to not be concerned with the technique through which that message becomes manifest. The technique is what makes it effective and the more effective the technique is the more impact the message will have. Whether it's an understated message or whether it's a more explicit message . . . the kind you would aim for in an essay.

MILLER: What do you consider to be the function of art?

MAJOR: Well, it has many functions. I'm sure you would agree with me that art doesn't have one function. I think before industrialization . . . you even look at the people who moved art into museums—the Europeans. After it moved into the museums it became an isolated thing from the community—from the center of life. Even if you look at pre-Christian art or say primitive Christian art you notice a tendency toward a non-representational use of art, you know, and the farther you'd go back into European art the more functional the art becomes—it's on pottery—it's on rugs.

MILLER: You're bringing up something which I gather a lot of people overlook and that's the fact that you are an artist. Not just a novelist or a poet but you paint, right?

MAJOR: Right. Well I started out . . .

MILLER: Are you still painting?

MAJOR: Yeah. Just for myself, though.

MILLER: I'd like to get your views on poetry here in Washington. Some of the things the English Department is doing. I know for example that Howard University lacks a literary journal. Do you find that when you're teaching your classes that poetry isn't appreciated as much or

there's a lack of knowledge of what's going on?

MAJOR: I think there's a lack of knowledge and I think where there's a lot of interest there's a lack of expertise and a lot of the students who really would care about reading contemporary poetry (like the kinds of things you'd find in *Hoo-Doo*, the only magazine in the area that's publishing a decent amount of Black poetry) don't know where to find it. A lot of the kids that I work with here have never heard of *Hoo-Doo*. Students who care about poetry, about writing it!

MILLER: Where do you think the fault lies? Is it with the teacher or the student?

MAJOR: Well I think it lies with the teacher and the student. I think it lies in the system. I think a university like this should get behind a magazine like that, for example—not only just one magazine. There could be a writing program in a school this size.

MILLER: What about—I don't mean to add on another question—but a Fiction Collective is written about in the reviews of your book. How does it operate?

MAJOR: The Fiction Collective started out as an alternative to the fact that commercial houses generally have decided they cannot afford to keep a slow selling book in print for a long time. They say they lose money. I guess they do. In effect, this says to the writer of quality fiction that either there is no market or one so scarce you can hardly see it. Anyway, the Collective started at Brooklyn College. Jonathan Baumbach, Peter Spielberg and a few other writers in the New York area started it. We have a growing list of members and we've published 12 books. The Collective operates like this: we invest in our own books. The individual author receives all the income from his or her book till the investment has been returned; then, the author splits profits with the Collective. It's working well, I earned back my investment, most of it anyway, right away.

MILLER: Thank you. □